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Our Take

The crumbling of the humanities

In the summer 2010 issue of *Modern Age*, its editor R.V. Young notes that over the lifetime of humanities professors now approaching retirement, humanities at American universities evolved from being a treasure house of memory to a means of weakening communal memory. Novels and poems used to be read as records of times past and verbal expressions of human passions and desires. Works of history were treated as attempts to find out *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, although Ranke himself could be contested in his brutally biased account of Teutonic dealings with Germany's eastern neighbors. Nevertheless, the principles and assumed goals of research were clear and sources could be rationally contested. Practically anyone could understand texts of even the most prominent teachers of history and literature.

Today scholarly texts are written in a language understandable only to a handful of readers who have mastered the same “secret knowledge.” The focus of research has likewise shifted—certain minorities became almost central to the study of humanities, while mainstream society, its struggles and achievements, its glories and tragedies faded from view. “Men’s history” has largely been replaced by “women’s history” as if the two genders had little in common. The social margin has been pushed to the center of research, while the previous center faded from view. The acknowledged masters of literature are not taught, while contemporary writers with a “correct” ideological agenda are. Thus both the change of topics and the new language conspire to make humanistic studies more and more irrelevant to the student eager to imbibe memory of the past. Our observations indicate that to recruit one major in gender studies or minority studies takes several times more money than it used to take to recruit a major in the masterpieces of European literature.

Economically, 2011 is a tough year. Cuts in salaries, employment, and grants are evident everywhere, including the humanities. Entire departments and schools are losing funding. The outcry of those who are affected is loud and clear: professors know how to complain if their jobs are being eliminated. They start nationwide campaigns to save their chairs.

However, as one looks at the courses these professors have taught or publications that paved their way to the top, one wonders whether they made a real contribution to the common good. Perhaps their disappearance is necessary in order for the new humanities to be born?Δ